

## 2001 Breeding Season Report

By

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and  
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### Overview of the season:

The 2001 breeding season was the 15th year that raptor monitoring has been conducted at Pinnacles National Monument. Methods used this year followed those established by Julie Rechten in 1988 and documented in the 1988-1992 Five Year Summary, except for the changes that have been made in subsequent years and documented in the yearly reports.

This season's Raptor Monitor was Betty Hayes, the only full time monitor, guided by Park Biologist Amy Fesnock. Additional help and training was given by Volunteer and past Raptor Monitor Julie Rechten. Amy and Julie also helped with team watches at Tunnel, Hawkins and Balconies. Other volunteers who helped monitor were Donna Hanna-Calvert, SCA Volunteers Dan Chrzanowski, Steve Alsup, and Solomon Lowenstein. Park employees Joe Dumyahn, David Soto, Liz Ballenger, and Thea Cohen also managed to go out with me once each. Even though these volunteers' time was limited, their extra pairs of eyes were always a big help.

Field observations began 9 January 2001 and ended 23 June 2001. The total number of observation hours by staff was 481. Volunteers' observation hours totaled 137. Total time in the field was 618 hours. The biologist's time and involvement was appropriate as needed to give me training about the protocol for this project, guide me to site observation spots, do team-watches when necessary, and to always be a helpful resource for information about breeding behavior of prairie falcons. Her expertise and ability gained through years of experience with this project was of immeasurable benefit to me and was of great help to me in assimilating all the data accumulated in the field and putting it into this report in a coherent form.

Prairie falcon mating pairs were observed at eleven sites. We believe one pair moved between alternate sites, Willow Springs Slide to Canyon North of Willow Springs Slide. Ten territories were occupied by active breeding prairie falcons. The pair at Prescribed Burn Cliffs may have begun incubation, but this could not be confirmed, and then disappeared resulting in an unknown occupation status. The other occupied sites are North Chalone, Hawkins Peak, Pig Canyon, North Balconies, Crowley Towers, Little Pinnacles, and Dry Wall. Of the nine nesting pairs, seven were successful and two, Goat Rock and Dry Wall, failed. The successful nests produced a total of 24 possible fledglings (22 confirmed). Cause of failure is unknown but parent birds at both of the

failed nests were seen apparently feeding chicks too young to be observed at Goat Rock and either feeding or still incubating at Dry Wall.

Although I observed a pair of golden eagles perched on the power poles at Dry Wall and there were occasional other reports of single eagles in the park, none were observed to be nesting within our boundary this year and there have been no reports of observations of juveniles within our boundary as of this report. Time did not allow checking on the sites on North and South Chalone Peaks, but Eagle Rock and Frog Canyon sites were always scanned as the raptor monitor was going to Balconies or Little Pinnacles. The pair of eagles using the Eucalyptus Grove on private land on the Pinnacles West Side did produce one chick that was about nine weeks old when last observed. It was not present when volunteers scanned for it about four weeks later. This eaglet was confirmed fledged by Lisa Smith on June 20.

## PRAIRIE FALCONS

All territories occupied by prairie falcons in the monument this season have been used in previous years by breeding pairs. Territories occupied in the past, that were visited this breeding season and found to be unoccupied, are Frog/hand, Scout Peak, and South Balconies. Sites that were occupied and either failed or were abandoned include Dry Wall, Goat Rock, Teapot Dome, Tunnel, and Egg. The pair that first occupied Willow Springs Slide apparently moved to successfully nest at Canyon North of Willow Springs Slide. A pair of prairie falcons began breeding behavior at Prescribed Burn Cliffs at the 2000 nest but it is unknown whether they moved, abandoned or failed. Breeding behavior was also observed at Tunnel, Teapot Dome and Egg but no attempt to nest was observed.

Of the ten territories occupied this year, seven were on historical nests; three were on new nest ledges (Table 1). The pair at Dry Wall used a pothole on the upper right side of the canyon, at Little Pinnacles the pair used a very large and whitewashed stick nest/hole on the lower face of the cliff and the right of North Yak, and at Hawkins the nest was located in a huge cave/hole in the Flakes area on the lower right side of the Hawkins Peak cliffs.

Prairie falcons arrived at Pinnacles National Monument before 12 January 2001. The first pair was observed on territory at Pig Canyon 16 January 2001. Incubation was first observed at Canyon North of Willow Springs on 22 March 2001. The first hatching occurred between 15-18 April at Pig Canyon with the last hatch approximately 8-12 May at the Hawkins site. Fledging within the monument was completed by 23 June 2001 when the last chick at Hawkins was observed flying and landing away from the nest. One of the earliest recorded fledging at Pinnacles occurred this year, with the Pig Canyon nest fledging on 25-26 May. Except for the late-hatching and fledging chicks at Hawkins, the breeding season in 2001 ended with the North Chalone chicks fledging on 3-4 June 2001, about seven days earlier than in previous years. For more information, please see the Prairie Falcon Nesting Phenology and Success table at the end of this report.

Table 1: Nest Sites

| Territory                  | Year | Height From Ground | Height From Top | Closest Climb | Aspect |
|----------------------------|------|--------------------|-----------------|---------------|--------|
| Dry Wall                   | new  | 60                 | 2               | none          | N      |
| Canyon N of Willow Springs | 1997 |                    |                 |               | N&W    |
| Pig Canyon                 | 1989 |                    |                 |               | SE     |
| Hawkins                    | new  | 50                 | 50              | #452          | SE     |
| Goat Rock                  | 1994 |                    |                 |               | E      |
| Prescribed Burn Cliffs     | 2000 |                    |                 |               | E      |
| Little Pinnacles           | new  | 10                 | 20              | #511<br>#510  | E      |
| North Balconies            | 1993 |                    |                 |               | ESE    |
| Crowley                    | 1997 |                    |                 |               | E      |
| North Chalone              | 1994 |                    |                 |               | SE     |

## GOLDEN EAGLES

There were no reports of golden eagles nesting in the park this season. There were a few reports of sightings by employees but no nesting activity was noticed, except for a report that one eagle was observed catching a ground squirrel on the Kingman Ranch and carrying it in the direction of South Wilderness. It could possibly have been heading toward a nest or mate. This year only the Frog Canyon and Eagle Rock nesting were observed on a regular basis when Little Pinnacles was being observed for prairie falcons and when traveling on Old Pinnacles trail to other sites. One pair of golden eagles was present twice at Dry Wall, perched on the power poles at the top of the canyon. Of these eagles, the female looked like a *Barthelemyi* with a lighter brown color and white feathers interspersed over her shoulders, wings and front of her body. The male looked very dark. When leaving Dry Wall, they flew NE. One evening I saw a golden eagle perched in a tree on the south side of the Dry Wall drainage and fly into another pine to probably roost. The Eucalyptus Grove on private property near the road to the park's West Side had an active nest that produced one eaglet. This juvenile was observed flying on 20 June 2001. The adult male at this territory was noticeably marked with white, patches on the shoulders and some mottled white spots out on the wings. The female of this territory also had white, but not as noticeable as the male. Her white was in the same bodily locations as the male, but not as much white, more mottled. In the nest at nine weeks of age the eaglet, unlike the parent birds, looked very dark. Due to lighting, we could not confirm this chick's plumage.

## RED-TAILED HAWK

Although there were numerous sightings of pairs and single adult red-tailed hawks in the park, no nesting pairs were confirmed. There was one report of a mating pair observed from the Entrance Station and an adult was seen carrying prey (snake) near the

Headquarters where red-tailed hawks have nest in the past. Pairs were also often observed in the Goat Rock/Resurrection Wall, Prescribed Burn, Citadel, and Frog Hand areas.

#### AMERICAN KESTREL

Kestrels were observed mating and flying in and out of the Prescribed Burn 2000 nest, a nest shared successfully with a pair of prairie falcons in the previous season. Nesting success this year was not confirmed since observations were discontinued after the prairie falcon pair abandoned the site. A territorial pair of kestrels was also often observed at Dry Wall.

#### OWLS

There were no reports of owls nesting in the park this season. Vocalizations were heard in the following locations: Great Horned Owls at Pinnacles Campground and Chalone Picnic Area; Western Screech Owls at Pinnacles Campground, Headquarters, and Discovery Wall; and Northern Pygmy Owls at Chalone Picnic Area. No Long-eared Owls or Barn Owls were heard or seen this year.

#### OTHER RAPTORS

Red-shouldered Hawks- One pair was observed carrying prey to nestlings in a tree-nest in Pinnacles Campground and there was a report of one possible fledgling.

Peregrine Falcon- One sub-adult was observed flying above and past Little Pinnacles.

Merlin- One adult was observed on Crud & Mud Rock and flew toward the High Peaks.

White-tailed Kite- One adult was observed hunting over Entrance Meadow.

Bald Eagle- One pair was observed circling above Chaparral Parking Lot.

Coopers Hawk and Sharp-shinned Hawks- See Coopers Hawk report - Clay Fletcher

#### HUMAN-RELATED ACTIVITIES

##### Climber/Hiker Compliance and Intrusion

Disregard of the climbing advisories was noticed only a few times this season. Climbers sitting on top of Hawkins were noticed twice early in the season and hikers were noticed in closed areas three times. In general it seems visitors have a positive attitude about the raptor program and are particularly pleased with the cooperative approach the park has used in managing this sensitive issue of human/wildlife use of a protected natural resource area. More than once a visitor has said to me, "This is great! Everybody wins!"

### Signs and Handouts

Although the non-compliance has been relatively stable over the past 5 years, previous raptor monitors have suggested that adding more signs into the backcountry would increase the compliance of visitors. We decided to test this hypothesis by removing the signage that is normally placed in the wilderness to see if we would have an increase in people wandering into sensitive, advisory areas. We did place the area-closed signs at the Balconies, because these signs are directly adjacent to the Balconies Cliffs Trail and thousands of visitors pass them each weekend. No raptor advisory signs were put up at Hawkins, Scout Peak, or Little Pinnacles. In order to access these areas, people are required to hike off-trail. The lack of signs in these remote locations did not result in more people exploring into these areas, which lead us to believe that more signs would not encourage people to avoid these areas. Probably enough contacts have been made over the years of this program to diminish the number of visitors who have not been informed or willfully ignore the guidelines for compliance. All climbing advisories were lifted this season on 29 June 2001 since the last prairie falcon fledgling was observed flying on 23 June 2001.

### Visitor Contacts

Visitor contacts are an important aspect of this program and raptor monitors have many opportunities to share and interpret the raptor/climber project as they monitor raptor activities from trailside observation spots. My experience with park visitors is that they both appreciate and are supportive of the project as they learn about it. They also enjoy the contact with a park employee and, when possible, being able to look at the falcons through a spotting scope or binoculars. These personal contacts enhance the quality of interpretation of the raptor project, as well as often reaching visitors who may have missed being informed about raptor advisories at the visitor centers or missed signs posted at trailheads and bulletin boards. On the trails 116 informal presentations were given to about 310 visitors about the raptor/climber project and its history and other park information. These contacts totaled about 13 hours with each contact lasting about 5 minutes each.

In addition to the trailside contacts the raptor monitor also traditionally gives a public presentation and slide program as part of International Migratory Bird Day. The theme this year was Shade Tree Coffee and Migratory Birds and my program was titled "From Dippers to Condors" and interpreted the idea that bird diversity is based on the vertical vegetation and physical structure of an area relating this concept to coffee fields in South America and Pinnacles National Monument. This year's program was presented at the Pinnacles Campground amphitheatre as a campfire program. The 1½hour program was attended by 33 visitors. Before the program I walked through the campground inviting campers to the program and talking about the raptor-monitoring project. On the following day two SCA volunteers and I were on-site at the Goat Rock observation site with two spotting scopes and extra binoculars to interpret and allow visitors to see the nesting prairie falcons that were attending a nest and feeding chicks. We talked with 78 visitors that day from 10:00 to 2:00. It was valuable opportunity to reach more visitors.

### Aircraft

At least 98+ planes or helicopters were recorded flying over Pinnacles National Monument during the raptor-breeding season. This is a low count since some aircraft was not noticed or simply forgotten if the raptor monitor was completely absorbed in recording prolonged raptor activity at the time the aircraft flew over the area. If possible, detailed descriptions of the aircraft, as well as ID numbers, were recorded in the monitoring notes and will be reported to appropriate aviation officials. In the future perhaps some interpretive information about the natural histories of some the sensitive species of wildlife residing in the park and how low-flying aircraft could affect them could be posted in some of the surrounding airports. To further emphasize efforts by the park to protect its natural resources and environment, the park climbing advisories might also be posted along with current ceiling regulations over protected areas.

### Sequoia Dispatch

This season Sequoia Dispatch was used as a backup safety net for the raptor monitor. The system used was for the raptor monitor to call Dispatch on the radio when leaving to go into the field and give them an expected time of return to home base. Upon returning from the field, the raptor monitor would again call Sequoia Dispatch to notify them of safe arrival at home base. If Dispatch did not receive the return call, then they would call a designated person in the park to see if the raptor monitor had returned from the field. This was a reassuring system since the raptor monitor often works alone in the field, often after dark, two or more hours after other park employees have gone off-duty, leaving no one to monitor the park radios. In case of an accident there would also be no one to call to for help. Fortunately this season there were no injuries and no need to use this emergency system.

### RECOMMENDATION

Advisory notices should be posted at the following trailheads: Pinnacles Campground Trail, Moses Spring Trail, Condor Gulch Trail, Chalone-High Peaks Trail, and Chalone – Old Pinn Annex Trail on the East Side and on the Juniper Canyon Trail and Balconies Trail on the West Side. In addition, at each Bulletin Board I believe a single-page handout with a brief history of raptor/climber program and a short natural history of park raptors with small images of each could be on one side. Small-scale maps of sensitive areas on other side would both inform visitors and further interpret the need for compliance in these areas.

Previous raptor reports since 1993 have addressed this need to have pamphlet holders at each bulletin board. This still needs to be put into action since a large percentage of visitors to the park don't stop at the visitor center and are therefore not aware of the advisories.

### SUMMARY

This was a successful breeding season for prairie falcons with seven nests and 24 fledged chicks. Except for the late-fledgling Hawkins chicks the other 20 chicks were fledged about seven days earlier than in the 2000 season. The only breeding pair of golden eagles confirmed was on the West Side on private property. No nesting pairs were observed in

the park. Several pairs of red-tailed hawks and kestrels were observed and some probably had nests but none were confirmed.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my sincere appreciation for the interest, information and support given by everyone in the park. I don't believe there was one employee who didn't ask me about the birds. I especially thank Amy for the quality of guidance and help given and Julie for so passionately sharing her wealth of information about raptors and this project. And thanks again for all the observation cards received and the volunteer extra eyes that went into the field with me.